

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***

For the week of March 9, 1998

This week, Kevin Savetz picks a fight with Net guru Neil Randall about the fate of the Internet. Are the power users ruining the Net for the rest of us? What about the newbies? Maybe Kevin just complains too much? See what they each have to say and decide for yourself.

=*=*= DEATH OF THE INTERNET? =*=*=

Kevin Savetz: I'm worried about the future of the Net, Neil. I've been feeling rather pessimistic about its fate. I'm not normally the brooding type, but when one is waiting through the increasingly long seconds while a web page downloads, one has time to contemplate these things. I think the Internet is on the brink of becoming too big. The problem is too many people sucking too much bandwidth. Too much noise and a dwindling amount of signal.

We've all read the reports about how Internet usage is growing exponentially. Is that a good thing? Sure, more people are online and more of us have high-speed access, but all those users are suffocating the Net. Connections seem to be slowing down -- this isn't just a subjective complaint. Sites like www.internettrafficreport.com report on the health of the Internet on a minute-by-minute basis, and the prognosis isn't good. More often than not, big chunks of the Net are bogged down. Internet outages, which used to be relatively rare, are now quite common -- even expected. And scientists are testing Internet 2, a high-speed network that is faster primarily because they're keeping the rabble -- us -- away. What do you say, Neil? Do you think the Net is gasping for breath?

Neil Randall: No, not at all. In fact, I think its respiratory system is only in its early and formative stages. There's no question that there are too many people sucking too much bandwidth, as you put it, but that's nothing more than a technical issue we have to grow through. I agree with you that we seem to be getting worse rather than better, but if we have this same conversation in the year 2001, we'll be wondering what the fuss was about.

The usual analogy is to the highway system, which grew and grew and then got more and more clogged. But the Net, although based right now on the geographical need for laying wires, will be able to take advantage of wires, satellites, and any other communications technology that comes along. If all six billion of us eventually get on the Net, I still think the technology will outstrip us. Right now, we run out of telephone numbers and even telephone lines, but there are ways to keep adding more.

We're going through very real growing pains now. But in my opinion, the Net is extremely healthy, a place for real communication, real business, real entertainment, and even real frivolity. It even has its healthy share of total junk (90% of everything is junk, right?). The goal, I think, is to let all of this stuff keep maturing, and that's where Internet 2 will ultimately fail. The original Net outgrew its academic roots, and I2 will as well.

The Net's not dying; in fact, it's just a little under the weather right now.

KMS: 90% of your argument is junk, Neil. Basically, you're betting that tomorrow's

technology will solve today's problems. The thing is -- today's problems are here today. I'm as patient as the next guy (which is to say, not very patient). The Net's backbones are clogged now, and things are getting worse every month. While you're waiting for magical new wires and satellites to save the Net, remember who has to lay those wires and launch those satellites: big businesses. Ones that are likely to do as little upgrading as possible in order to protect their bottom line, then make us end users pay through the nose when higher speeds are finally available.

I fear that if the network is, by some technological miracle, unclogged by 2001, it will be because we're all forking over all of our money to MCI, which will single-handedly own the Internet. (OK, maybe that's going a bit too far.)

But people don't realize bandwidth is a limited resource, a commodity. So we waste it. We burn it by visiting frivolous web sites, by FTPing software from a site across the Atlantic (when the same thing is available from a local mirror site). When we do these things, there's less bandwidth for everyone else. Maybe the people creating the problem aren't the ones with cable modems and T1 lines, but the users who are ignorant of how the Net really works.

NFR: Ah, Kevin, always the gloomy naysayer. What you're saying, basically, is that you can't stand the fact that the Net is so popular, and that all these dorks and suits are making Net-life so difficult for those of us who truly know why the thing exists. Well, the popularity will save the thing. Big business won't like it, but they'll have to provide service if they want customers, just as they do in stores. E-commerce will be a very big thing (you probably don't agree with that, either), and the upgraders will have no choice but to keep tackling the tech problems. So yes, I do believe that tomorrow's technology will solve today's problems.

I see no evidence that bandwidth is a limited resource. We can always build more. That entire argument, to me, is a red herring. And as for those nasty frivolous Web sites, that's what will keep the Net more or less what it is today. As long as people want the Net to remain the combination of serious and frivolous it is today, big business doesn't dare stop it from happening, because big business is hugely concerned with public relations. If they want bucks, they have to let people play. As for FTPing stuff across the Atlantic, I agree it's a problem, but it has no solution. You simply can't expect the average user to stop themselves from doing something the technology makes so easy.

KMS: Technology also makes it easy to stuff a ball of aluminum foil in the microwave, but people know better. If the Net is to be saved in the long run, it will be -- at least partly -- because its users are better educated. It won't be enough to figure out how to plug in the WebTV, you'll have to know how to treat the Net with respect. Upgrading the technology is important, but those new wires and satellites will only be effective if people don't abuse them.

The first step to respecting the Net, Neil, is knowing that bandwidth is indeed a limited resource. There is only a certain amount of information that you can move between any two points on the Net in a given second. When you're using some of that bandwidth, no one else can.

Time will tell, Neil. I'll e-mail you in 2001 and we'll find out who is right.

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet Community Forum -- GO INETCOM and look in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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